Humans Are More Important Than Hardware

Start acting like it

by Capt Bryan Claudio

Discussions about how to fight a near-peer or emerging threat routinely revolve around improvements to equipment or implementing new technology. In his 2011 address to West Point, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said,

> When it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right, from the Mayaguez to Grenada, Panama, Somalia, the Balkans, Haiti, Kuwait, Iraq, and more.[1]

As Gates' comments remind us, future wars are often unpredictable and will

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not be won by changes in technology alone; instead, leaders must change their thinking. Warfare is unpredictable; however, we can predict it will require the finest leadership. While advancements in warfighting technology has changed the tides of war, effective battlefield leadership is equally critical to success. The first Special Operations

Forces Truth states that "humans are more important than hardware." While a tenet of the U.S. Special Operations Command, that statement holds true for all military branches. The right people, trained appropriately, and working as an effective, cohesive team will accomplish the mission with what they have available, and no amount of equipment can turn a poorly run team into a successful unit. Of course, as then-Gen Mattis stated in 2009, "The (command and control) of the future is command and feedback," and emerging, complex security challenges require the employment of innovative technology, increased technical skill, and upgraded equipment; however, effective leadership at all levels with authentic is regular feedback from subordinates, ultimately as vital to unit success.

Google's "Project Aristotle" conducted by their People Operations team studied over one hundred groups for more than a year to evaluate what makes an effective team. One result from this study is a fifteen-question feedback form that opens communication up the chain of command. According to the study, one common factor within great teams is the equal distribution of talking time when solving problems. Such equity can be achieved through decentralized command, delegation of work, and subordinate feedback. These traits are devalued or lacking among too many careerists who only seek promotion and aim to please those up the chain of command. This mindset is a grave mistake as demonstrated by the growing number of

The first Special Operations Forces Truth states that "humans are more important than hardware," a maxim that applies to all military organizations. (Photo by LCpl Zachary Ford.)

leaders. Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr, 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, had an interesting recommendation to improve the performance of our Corps:

> (Gen Gray) recommends adding one new little box to the officer evaluation reports: It would say, "Does this officer care more about his career than about his troops?" A "yes" mark would terminate that officer's career.[2]

While this recommendation seems extreme, it stresses the necessity of subordinate feedback and effective leadership down the chain of command rather than self-serving behavior up the chain of command.

Retention in the military presents a continuous struggle. Yet, current data only analyzes those who exit the military, while the command climate surveys analyze the atmosphere within a unit. A 2019 Marine Corps study identified "survey fatigue" as a problem because of the inundation of units with too many surveys. Previously, the number of surveys conducted per eighteen-month cycle were five Defense Organizational Climate Surveys (DEOCSs), three Commandants Command Climate Surveys, and between three and six additional surveys, such as maintenance, administrative, or safety surveys, depending on the type of unit. The Commandants Command Climate Surveys is now discontinued in favor of one DEOCS within 90 days of change of command, plus a single survey annually thereafter.[3] The DEOCS provides a detailed survey of the command climate, as well as of Equal Opportunity and Sexual Assault Prevention issues, which are all important to the health of the organization. Unfortunately, however, the DEOCS evaluates the whole organization, as opposed to the leader as an individual. It is understandable that Marines do not want repeated surveys

issued year-round; however, the proposed questionnaire below is a short fifteen-question survey targeted specifically at evaluating the direct chain of command, both officer and enlisted, and focused on the Marine's immediate team. Utilizing this questionnaire will provide leaders with direct feedback and the Marines with the opportunity to affect the performance of their unit. Listening to and focusing efforts on subordinates will also ensure success, not only for a leader as an individual but for the entire unit.

"Project Aristotle" initially attempted to identify commonalities among successful teams, such as highly structured meetings versus open discussion with meandering agendas, and teams that have a social life together outside of work versus those with exclusively professional interactions. However, Google's People Operations team ascertained that none of these factors were common among the most successful teams, which, in fact, displayed a broad spectrum of group dynamics. "Project Aristotle" identified five traits common among top performing teams, with psychological safety being the most important. Psychological safety is broken down into two elements: "equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking" and "average social sensitivity."

Equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking happens when the entire team has an opportunity to express ideas or problems. When such conditions were present, the team performed well. Conversely, when a single person or small portion of the team spoke the majority of the time, collective intelligence and performance declined. As military leaders, the obvious implication of these studies is to decentralize command and delegate tasks. Shirking responsibility down the chain is not

the answer, and the leader still decides the final plan of action. The resulting equality allows military leaders to tap into the vast, too often underestimated knowledge and experience of their subordinates. In the current climate, subordinates seldom feel comfortable expressing ideas to overbearing, dominant commanders or leaders who have an "I have always done it this way" mentality or those who use fear as a tactic for ensuring compliance. This fear stems from several sources, most of which are rooted in the lack of trust down the chain of command.

The need for greater equity and freedom of expression also requires an "average social sensitivity." This refers to the skill of understanding non-verbal cues to determine when an individual feels ostracized by or disagrees with a group. While leaders will have to make unpopular decisions at times, it is important to understand the mindset of subordinates and relay the importance of why a controversial decision is made. "Psychological safety" is

> a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.[4]

This fear of rejection or embarrassment is a common feeling among young Marines. Everyone who has served has encountered a leader who has little control of his or her emotions when something goes awry and often directs frustration at subordinates. Critics often refer derisively to psychological safety as a "safe space," but in fact, it refers to the sense by a subordinate that he has opportunity to present an idea, and leadership can either provide mentorship to improve upon the idea, utilize the idea, or reject it with a reasonable explanation after discussion; in such environments, the team improves. After psychological safety is established, in order of importance, the remaining traits to encourage in a team are dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, and impact.

Dependability is identified as members reliably completing quality work on time. Dependability is obvious in

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successful teams as the quality and timeliness of work or performance characterizes top performing teams in the eyes of command. Next comes structure and clarity: an individual's understanding of job expectations, the process for fulfilling those expectations, and the consequences of negative performance. This clarity is improved through open communication throughout the chain of command. When a leader provides the unit with clear expectations and goals (e.g. Command Guidance in the Marine Corps), performance improves. Next is the concept of meaning, which is the sense of purpose in either the work itself or the outcome of the team's work. The meaning behind one's work is unique to the individual and finding a sense of purpose is difficult for some. The tale of John F. Kennedy and the janitor express this meaning. During President John F. Kennedy's first visit to NASA headquarters in 1961, he introduced himself to a janitor who was mopping the floor and asked him what he did at NASA. "I am helping put a man on the moon!" replied the janitor. This tale can be related to junior Marines who are asked to conduct a seemingly menial task. If left to wonder the purpose behind the task, the individual feels used and unimportant, but if the overall goals are truthfully shared, then the seemingly menial task is identified as a single link in the chain of success. The last trait of the study is impact, or the idea that your work and efforts are making an identifiable difference in the unit. Impactful performance directly ties into subordinate feedback. If a leader hears a suggestion from one of his or her Marines, then implements said idea, it directly displays that not only will the leader listen to the subordinate, but it provides the Marine with tangible feedback that their efforts have made a difference in the success of the unit. The aforementioned five behaviors are easily identifiable when a leader instills them into a unit, just as they are identifiable when they are neglected. It is the responsibility of the leader at every level to ensure they are adhering to these standards.

The below questionnaire is a result of Google's "Project Aristotle."[5] The word

"manager" is replaced with "leader" in this instance to focus on military personnel. Questions one through thirteen are rated using the Likert Scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The second section is available for direct comments to the leader.

1. I would recommend my (leader) to others.
2. My (leader) assigns stretch opportunities to help me develop my career.
3. My (leader) communicates clear goals for our team.
4. My (leader) provides actionable feedback on a regular basis.
5. My (leader) provides the autonomy I need to do my job (i.e. does not micromanage by getting involved in details that should be handled at other levels).
6. My (leader) consistently shows consideration for me as a person.
7. My (leader) keeps the team focused on priorities, even when its difficult (e.g., declining or deprioritizing other projects).
8. My (leader) regularly shares relevant information from their (leader) and senior leadership.
9. My (leader) has had a meaningful discussion with me about my career development in the last six months.
10. My (leader) has technical expertise required to effectively manage me.
11. The actions of my (leader) show they value the perspective I bring to the team, even if it is different from their own.
12. My (leader) makes tough decisions effectively (e.g. decisions involving multiple teams, competing priorities).
13. My (leader) effectively collaborates across boundaries (e.g., team, organizational).

The Feedback Survey also asks for confidential comments.

1. What would you recommend your (leader) keep doing?
2. What would you have your (leader) change?

The leader feedback model should coincide with the reviewed Marines FITREP schedule. This questionnaire is not the same as a quantitative FITREP profile; it is utilized as a reference for the Marine Reported On and his Reporting Senior or Reviewing Officer. The FITREP is not a mentoring tool,

but this questionnaire should coincide with FITREPS to provide regularity when changing of RS or transferring commands. If the Marine Reported On is given an unobserved FITREP, then this questionnaire is not required but is still available for use. This questionnaire is answered anonymously by the subordinates to allow complete honesty in the response. The leaders receiving this feedback must accept the feedback maturely and understand that not every response will be well thought out or appropriate. Despite these outliers, most responses will be candid. The young FITREP eligible leaders (sergeants and lieutenants) are still developing their leadership style. This regular feedback, in conjunction with the mentorship of their direct leadership, will develop healthy leadership styles, which will continue to improve as these young leaders rise in rank. Once the officers reach O-5 level command, they will then utilize the DEOCS for their units. As stated above, this questionnaire is an evaluation of the leader, not the unit, and should be carried out in concert with the DEOCS to cover overall unit success. As the enlisted leaders grow, they will still use the questionnaire, and their leadership style will develop accordingly, increasing the health of the unit, and contributing to improved lethality downrange.

More technology is not the answer for improving combat success against a near-peer adversary. The best way to improve the Marine Corps' lethality against these threats is by developing competent, trusted leaders and effective teams. Developing these leaders is possible only through regular feedback from subordinates. The need for high-quality leaders is to improve the overall health of the units who are asked to employ emerging technologies. Reliance upon technology alone to meet future threats will result in mission failure. NCOs and junior officers in all fields are asked to lead with more gear, more personnel, and more responsibility. Marines are trusted to accomplish these complex tasks, so they should also have the opportunity to provide honest feedback to their leaders. This proposed survey provides Marines the

opportunity for generating and encouraging open discussion, which will, in turn, improve overall psychological safety and generate regular, high-quality improvements. The unit will become more self-sufficient and more dependable. Major businesses throughout the world have noticed a trend towards their employees seeking a purpose in their work rather than seeking purely financial benefits. This is a trend common in the generation now entering the workforce, an equivalent population to those entering the military. Providing clear guidance and structure will ensure all are moving towards a common goal. In doing so, everyone will understand the meaning behind each task and the impact of their efforts. These proposals are not new ideas or based in groundbreaking theories. The unfortunate reality, nevertheless, is that the suggested feedback system, if accepted by the Marine Corps, will take time to implement. Thankfully, Google has

made their findings and questionnaire public. It took the brightest minds in Silicon Valley years to develop these conclusions and this questionnaire. We must accept the work they have done and implement it immediately. It is the responsibility of every leader to do what is necessary to improve their unit. For that reason, every leader should give the questionnaire to their Marines and face the challenge of accepting critique productively. We should all heed the words of Robert Greenleaf from *Servant Leadership*: "Don't assume, because you are intelligent, able, and well-motivated, that you are open to communication, that you know how to listen."[6] Today's military leaders should not fear the response but accept the authenticity of leadership assessments and trust the Marines to impress with their ability to rise to the challenge.

Notes

1. Robert Gates, "Secretary of Defense Speech," (speech, West Point, NY, February 2011).

2. Thomas Ricks, *Making the Corps,* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2007).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMINS 291/19, Command Climate Survey Compliance*, (Washington, DC: May 2019).

4. Amy Edmunson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, (Ithaca, NY: Johnson Graduate School of Management, 1999).

5. Information regarding Google's Manager Feedback Survey available at https://rework.withgoogle.com.

6. Robert Greenleaf and Larry Spears, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness,* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2002).

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